



Water, Water Everywhere?

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

American author Henry David Thoreau once said, “Water is a pioneer which the settler follows, taking advantage of its improvements.” In Thoreau’s time, Americans could choose their homestead wherever they found natural resources, especially water.

Today, America and Texas are settled. The land has been claimed, and we can no longer follow water. We must instead capture and transport it – to our homes, our public buildings, our crops and our power plants. And as population grows and droughts seem to last longer, we find ourselves increasingly at the mercy of the heavens to drop rain.

Though we remain largely at the mercy of the weather, there are ways we can work together to ensure Texas families, farmers and industries have the water they need to survive the blistering summer heat.

In March, I sat down in Washington with water stakeholders from Texas whose work is the stewardship of this precious resource. The meeting was part of Texas Water Day, an annual event that brings policy makers and water experts together. The goal is simple: maximizing availability of water in Texas.

Our state’s professionals address matters of life and death. Their decisions must survive the briar patches of local and state politics, policies and personalities. In short, their jobs are not easy, and are further complicated by the unpredictability of Texas weather.

The federal government does its part to help Texans meet their water needs. The feds can’t make it rain, but can help provide information and technical assistance to support local water conservation and management efforts.

The federal Water Resources Development Act encourages creative partnership ideas between the federal government and local and state water-planning entities. The law was last updated in 2000, and Texas water officials have told me it needs to be changed again.

This legislation helps govern water policy across the country, including flood control, navigable waterways maintenance, restoration of the environment, increased recreational use, and providing water supply.

These local-federal partnerships can help secure a dependable and safe water supply for Texas, but it’s a challenging job. Our water needs are fast outstripping our rainfall and other water resource totals.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that in coming decades, about half of our country’s population increase

will be in three states: Texas, California and Florida. At the same time, Texas’ Drought Preparedness Council reported last month that the March 2005 to February 2006 period was the driest in Texas since 1963-64, and the fourth driest year on record. The trend is not good.

Our reservoir levels around the state are currently in decent shape. But preliminary predictions are for a hot, dry summer. Every year, we seem to have less margin for adverse weather conditions.

The state’s 16 water-planning groups have prepared regional blueprints that have been folded into a statewide ‘Water for Texas’ plan. This comprehensive document addresses future water needs for human health and welfare, economic development and environmental sustainability.

And while the plan certainly must pass muster as it is implemented locally, the federal government can help Texas now in this move.

Reliable data is critical to accurate water planning for the state. State and local governments have two excellent resources: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which provides technical support and analyzes water data, and the U.S. Geological Survey, which oversees stream gauges that provide a valuable water-management tool.

From our earliest days, Texans have been all too aware of both the blessings and curses that water can bring. We have enjoyed the cool, invigorating flow of river water on a 100-degree day, and a horizon teeming with healthy crops. But we’ve also suffered with land fractured by drought or buried by flood.

We no longer have uninhabited stretches of streaming river banks or coastline where entire new communities of settlers can live. But we do have Texans of national reputation committed to ensuring the state can rely on a water-supply infrastructure to meet our growing future demands.

We appreciate their work. Texas may be the best place in the U.S. to live, but it’s also hotter and drier than most places. We need our water.

Sen. Cornyn is a member of the following Senate Committees: Armed Services, Judiciary, Budget, Small Business and Entrepreneurship, and Joint Economic. He is also the chairman of the subcommittees on Immigration, Border Security and Citizenship and Emerging Threats and Capabilities. He served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge.